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Finding “Bluebeard” in Kurt Vonnegut’s *Bluebeard*

Ankit Raj  and Nagendra Kumar

Kurt Vonnegut’s *Bluebeard* (1987), purported as the autobiography of a fictitious Abstract Expressionist painter named Rabo Karabekian, derives its title from a French fairy tale. The most popular surviving version of the tale, written by Charles Perrault, recounts the gory story of a wealthy man called Blue Beard known for his multiple marriages and missing wives. As the story proceeds, Blue Beard woos the young daughter of a local villager with an extravagant display of his charm and riches and takes her as his latest wife. He has to leave for another town for a few weeks, and having entrusted his wife with the keys to his palace, he departs, explicitly forbidding her not to enter a particular chamber unless she intends to invite his wrath. The girl resists curiosity but soon gives in and opens the door to discover corpses of her husband’s former wives. The man returns and discovers the act from a blood stain on the key. The young girl is saved by her brothers just as Blue Beard is about to murder her. She inherits his fortune, gets her younger sister married to a fine gentleman, and she herself marries again, living happily ever after. The tale has come to be so notorious that the word “Bluebeard” is often used to describe “a man who marries and kills one wife after another,” or, a philanderer (“[Words We’re Watching](#)”).

Rabo Karabekian, the protagonist in Vonnegut’s *Bluebeard*, christens himself “Bluebeard” in the novel, cursing himself for failing numerous women in his lifetime and keeping his life’s best work, a magnificent painting, locked away in a potato barn: “I am Bluebeard, and my studio is my *forbidden chamber*” (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 51; italics in original). We, however, believe that the character in the novel that comes closest to deserving the diabolical moniker from the French fairy tale is Dan Gregory – a legendary realist painter, sympathizer of Mussolini’s fascism, a misogynist and Rabo’s mentor.

The present article is an intertextual analysis of Perrault’s *Blue Beard* and Vonnegut’s *Bluebeard*. It draws parallels between Perrault’s version of the fairy tale and Vonnegut’s descriptions of Dan Gregory in his novel to arrive at a revelation that if indeed there is a character in Vonnegut’s novel emulating the French Blue Beard, it is Dan Gregory and not Rabo Karabekian. The article draws parallels between the material, behavioral and ideological traits of the two Bluebeards as well as analyzes the meaning and implications of the prime objects of their obsession and disgust – the corpse chamber of the French Blue Beard, and modern art in the case of the conservative realist Dan Gregory. By establishing an alternate reading of the Vonnegut novel, the article rediscovers, perhaps this time with its intended meaning, one of the best yet underrated works in the author’s oeuvre.

Enter Bluebeard

Perrault’s tale introduces Blue Beard as the owner of “fine houses” furnished with silver and gold cutlery, “carved furniture,” gilded coaches, gold and silver coins and “caskets of jewels” (“Blue Beard”). The tale describes his closets, wardrobes and rooms as embellished with the finest “tapestry, beds, couches, cabinets, stands, tables, and looking-glasses” (“Blue Beard”). Dan Gregory’s New York City apartment in Vonnegut’s *Bluebeard* is no less magnificent. When Rabo Karabekian first arrives at the house, he cannot help but express awe at the “noble oak door” and “massive iron hinges” at Gregory’s doorstep (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 92). He discovers, to his amazement, that Gregory has bought three

huge four-storey high apartments and conjoined the houses into a leviathan of New York brownstone, the lower floors and the basement joined with “doors and archways,” and the top floor stripped entirely of the dividing walls, leaving six glowing fireplaces in a continuum that violates “all laws of time and space by going on and on and on” (103–104).

Bluebeard the Wizard

Both Blue Beard in the French story and Dan Gregory in the Vonnegut novel are adept at commanding respect by deceiving and controlling those around them. While Perrault’s Blue Beard lures the country folk with “pleasure parties, hunting, fishing, dancing, mirth, and feasting” (“Blue Beard”); Dan Gregory, an Armenian American, mingles with the American folk by changing his surname from the foreign-sounding Gregorian to the shorter Gregory and establishes himself as the leading realist painter of his time by painting grand historical scenes of good against evil, having no moral compass of his own. Gregory’s apartment is full of instruments of deception and control. Rabo comes across “a spiral staircase” (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 93) which Lawrence Broer has aptly termed a “mechanistic [system] of control” (165). Fifty-two mirrors of peculiar shapes and sizes hang at crazy angles in Gregory’s studio, trapping the baffled spectator in a carnival of surreal infinity. While the French Blue Beard’s extravagant galas are intended to woo potential wives in succession, Dan Gregory’s deceptive measures and enigmatic displays of grandeur are aimed at tricking both artists and laymen alike into an ideological submission to the fabricated divinity of himself as the supreme artist of his era.

Bluebeard the Barbarian

Dan Gregory’s interior decor “teems with hellish omens” (165), reflecting his grotesque mind. His door knocker is “a Gorgon’s head, with intertwined asps forming her necklace and hair” (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 92), fit for a man whose art “is loveless and stagnant and turns to stone the humanity of all who look upon it” (Broer 165). There are eight skulls on his mantelpiece, assembled according to size, “with a child’s at one end and a great-grandfather’s at the other – a marimba for cannibals” (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 104). As Rabo further explores Gregory’s apartment, he finds “early American antiques” (96) and “weapons and tools and idols and icons and hats and helmets and ship models and airplane models and stuffed animals, including a crocodile and an upright polar bear” (105). As a mentor and father-figure to Rabo, Dan Gregory represents, in Joseph Campbell’s words, “the ogre aspect of the father” (107). The creases on his face are “infected with verdigris” (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 93). Like a wraith he sits “motionless and silent – and shapeless in a voluminous black caftan” (104) as if conducting a “satanic ritual” (Broer 165). He is described as a master of deception and counterfeit, his works imitating gross impurities like “rust and rust-stained oak” (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 92), “images in dusty mirror” (105), “verdigris” (93) and “plant diseases” (93). The dead animals and other morbid decorations point at Dan Gregory’s propensity for tyrannical control. While both Bluebeards furnish their dwellings with the most ornate and expensive items at their disposal, their obsession with antique furnishings is worth pondering as well as not too surprising as their taste for dated interior decor is in accordance with their own conservative outlooks on life.

The Bluebeards are fanatics living in the past, bigoted to the extent of considering women as expendable playthings having no feelings, merits and dreams of their own. Perrault’s Blue Beard is an elitist wealthy man who considers women as instruments to be disposed of whenever he sees it fit. Vonnegut’s Bluebeard is a misogynist in the same vein. Dan Gregory regularly beats up Marilee Kemp, his secretary and mistress. He addresses her as “women,” a sex he sees unworthy of “the arts or sciences or politics or industry,” created by God only “to have children and encourage men and take care of the housework” (151–52). He considers women as harbingers of trouble and misery. When Marilee is pregnant with their child, Gregory gets it aborted. He pushes her down the stairs, landing her in a hospital, upon discovering that she has been passing on his expensive art material to young Rabo.

Dan Gregory's opinions on art, society and politics are fascist to the point of being diabolical. He hails Mussolini as the greatest leader of mankind, paints historical scenes of wars and massacres, despises democracy and leaves for Europe to join "Mussolini's great social experiment" (115). He looks down upon modernist art forms as "the work of swindlers and lunatics and degenerates" (147) and forbids Marilee and Rabo from visiting the Museum of Modern Art which, according to him, contains the "vomit of lunatics and degenerates and charlatans" (177). His idea of Satan is Pablo Picasso. Gregory hails artists as "gods on earth" (Farrell 104), as "justices of the Supreme Court of Good and Evil" (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 150). Modern art, as per Dan Gregory, is a democratic form of expression. He dreams that if Mussolini takes over America, the fascist leader would "burn down the Museum of Modern Art and outlaw the word *democracy*" (147; italics in original). Dan Gregory is "a taxidermist of big moments" (Kopper 584), mimicking cruel scenes of the vilest man-made massacres on canvas. He befriends fellows of his own kind. Fred Jones – an artist, fighter plane pilot and Dan Gregory's best friend – gets orgasmic satisfaction upon seeing "smoke trails of falling airplanes" (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 170), serving as an unsettling reminder of Guillermo Reyes, a pilot in Vonnegut's *Galápagos*, who considers dropping bombs on huge populations "more fun than sexual intercourse" (Vonnegut, *Galápagos* 700).

Trapped at Bluebeard's!

Life for the French wife as well as for Rabo and Marilee would be perhaps more depressing in the world outside than their grim existence with their respective masters. The French girl in Perrault's tale comes from a humble family, and to lead a married life with her strict but rich husband seems like the wisest choice under her circumstances. In Vonnegut's novel, Marilee is a girl with no education, no skills, no relations, a history of traumatic abuse and nothing to count on to help her survive on her own should she choose to leave Gregory's house. Rabo, not even twenty, has lost his mother, and his father doesn't make enough to give him a life better than what the young apprentice envisions for himself under his master's tutelage. Rabo reminds his readers that he lived with Dan Gregory as an apprentice during the years of the Great Depression when an "awful lot of people were putting up with any sort of job" and the young artist was "lucky to have a job of any kind" (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 173), even if it meant suffering humiliation at times. Since neither Vonnegut nor Rabo are religious enough to believe in Heaven and Hell as separate realms beyond mortal existence, Rabo's comment that life in 1936 "seemed as real as Hell" (173) probably captures his observation that there is no hell elsewhere than life itself with the Great Depression and his mentor plaguing him. It follows quite naturally that violating their masters' strictest orders seems like the obvious human instinct of the thrill-hungry captives in the two stories. The French wife's curiosity leads her to the forbidden chamber while Rabo and Marilee vent their frustration with their routine romantic visits to the Museum of Modern Art against Gregory's explicit orders. The disobedient trespassers are caught red handed both in Perrault's story and in Vonnegut's novel. Blue Beard discovers his wife's violation of his orders from the bloodstained key: "You wished to go into the cabinet? Very well, madam; you shall go in, and take your place among the ladies you saw there" ("Blue Beard"). Dan Gregory, the "Antichrist in artist's clothing" (Broer 165), catches Marilee and Rabo coming out of the Museum: "You parasites! You ingrates! You rotten-spoiled little kids! ... Your loving Papa asked just one thing of you as an expression of your loyalty: 'Never go into the Museum of Modern Art'" (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 175). He orders Rabo out of his apartment, though Marilee continues living with him, having no choice but to suffer routine beatings and humiliation.

Bye Bye Bluebeard!

Hubris, when it exceeds beyond measure, causes the fall of men. The French Blue Beard exerts absolute authority over his wives. He considers his current wife as no different from her predecessors in the sense that he assumes the woman to be under his control and underestimates her as being terrified

enough – now that he has handed her a death sentence – never to dream of pulling off another unprecedented act of rebellion. His false assumption and overweening pride spell his doom as he grants his wife fifteen minutes of solitude as per her last wish, during which she summons her brothers just in time to save her by killing the villain. Dan Gregory's fatal flaw is his proud presumption that what Mussolini stands for is a progressive social revolution and that by assisting the fascist he would accomplish great deeds. He leaves America to join the dictator's army in Italy but his "fatal enchantment with Italian fascism" (Hertweck 149) gets him killed in action, having changed nothing.

In Perrault's story, Blue Beard leaves no heirs. His wife inherits his fortune, using it to buy commissions for her brothers and to get her sister and herself married to worthy gentlemen. In Vonnegut's *Bluebeard*, Dan Gregory's martyrdom fighting for fascist Italy elevates Marilee Kemp's social reputation to get her noticed by Mussolini himself. The dictator gets her married to the Count of Florence, and upon the Count's death, Marilee inherits freedom, a sprawling mansion and a huge fortune to spend as she deems fit. She uses it to help the female victims of war.

Conclusion

It follows from the parallels drawn so far that Dan Gregory has more in common than Rabo Karabekian has with Perrault's Blue Beard. Unlike Perrault's villain who hides corpses in his closet and keeps glamorous deceptions in plain sight, Vonnegut's Bluebeard proudly presents his death instinct up front in the form of the grotesque furnishings in his apartment, and keeps the Museum of Modern Art – the antidote to his Thanatos – out of his subjects' reach. Modernist art forms are to Dan Gregory what the corpses in the forbidden chamber are to Perrault's Blue Beard. The French Blue Beard's hidden chamber conceals his greatest fear – corpses of his murdered wives which, if chanced upon, would bring about his fall. Likewise, the Museum of Modern Art houses what Dan Gregory would rather not face – modernist works of art embodying democratic ideals that the fascist realist painter is afraid would challenge his own artistic divinity and dethrone him should the masses, Rabo and Marilee in particular, begin to hold modern art in high esteem. Ultimately, both Bluebeards have their egos deflated despite their best efforts to retain high ground. While the entire French village discovers Blue Beard for the devil he is behind his generous façade, Dan Gregory's worthy apprentice, Rabo Karabekian, shuns the former's traditional realism for the modern abstract expressionist school of art. Rabo leaves his mentor's shadow to find his true calling with his own artistic style of marrying abstract expressionism with a "hyper-realistic humanism" (Tally 129) which, unlike Gregory's authoritative and soulless art, is humane enough to value life and democratic enough to leave "meaning up to the viewer" (Hertweck 149). On a larger level, Kurt Vonnegut himself seems to approve of Rabo's choice of the freedom offered by modern art over the harsh realism and authoritarianism of traditional art, as the author advises his young fans in a letter to a high school class: "Practice any art, . . . not to get money and fame, but to experience becoming, . . . to make your soul grow" ("*Make your soul grow*"). Vonnegut shares a similar opinion on art and artists in the framing chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five* where he is reluctant to claim moral superiority as a writer and simply calls himself a "trafficker in climaxes and thrills and characterization" (Vonnegut *Slaughterhouse-Five* 4).

It is a commonly accepted notion among readers that Rabo Karabekian is the eponymous Bluebeard of the novel as the fictitious narrator would have us believe, although Vonnegut hints at a deception lying in plain sight by making Dan Gregory the big bad of the novel who makes Rabo's misogyny – belittling the women in his life – look substantially pale in comparison. By describing Gregory's villainy in vivid detail, Vonnegut may have wanted the reader to go beyond the surface and look for a deeper interpretation of the moniker which has been clearly misunderstood thanks to the red herring thrown by the guilt-ridden Rabo Karabekian. The idea of Dan Gregory as the true Bluebeard of the novel does explain Rabo's inadvertent misogyny as not something of his own making but arising out of his diabolical mentor's influence. However, it doesn't let Rabo completely off the hook, as he does have a mind of his own to think better for himself. Despite his dislike of Gregory, Rabo is more like his fascist realist mentor than he wishes to admit. His inability to decide better for himself in the midst of bad influences is in the Vonnegutian tradition of

perplexed protagonists willfully choosing to be led astray by toxic philosophies, reminiscent in particular of – Billy Pilgrim’s “complacent denial of death” (Raj and Kumar 12) and suffering which he learns from Tralfamadorian aliens in *Slaughterhouse-Five*; Dwayne Hoover’s lunacy fueled by a work of fiction that leads him on a rampage in *Breakfast of Champions*; Dr. Felix Hoenikker’s single-minded pursuit of science and his indifference to the devastating use of his inventions in *Cat’s Cradle*; and Winston Niles Rumfoord accidentally slaughtering the entire Martian population under the impression of leading an intergalactic peace mission in *The Sirens of Titan*.

Bluebeard is one of Kurt Vonnegut’s later works – tinged by the author’s own experiences with art, his two wives and his other motherly influences – written at a time when he was ripe with age and wisdom so he could look back on his life with well accustomed eyes. To misinterpret the intended interpretation of a novel so personal has been a gross injustice that the present article has attempted to remedy by establishing an alternate take on one of Vonnegut’s most poignant yet underrated works.

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